

Vermeer's Paradox: Experts Baffled by Impossible Photo Found in Salesman's Case

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Nicknamed *Vermeer's Paradox*, this photo emerged after decades lost in an historical archive in Philadelphia

PHILADELPHIA — A photograph, nicknamed *Vermeer's Paradox*, has emerged from a private archive that challenges the basic tenets of photography history, spatial logic, and cultural memory. The image printed here was discovered by Dr. Ilona Bertram, a noted photography historian and longtime archivist at the Philadelphia Historical Society. What it depicts has left scholars from multiple disciplines stunned, if not baffled.

The photograph shows a fully articulated interior room, somehow taken within the hard shell of a late 1930's Philips traveling salesman's projector case. The empty case itself, gifted anonymously to the Philadelphia Historical Society in 1950, was rediscovered by Bertram in the PHS archive in July 2019. It shows no evidence of tampering or mechanical expansion. Just before they were ready to dispose of this odd specimen from their collection, a photographic print was found by Dr. Bertram behind the lining inside the box, revealing a space furnished within the carrying case seen from an impossible view, like removing the fourth wall so to speak. The photograph depicts two glass spheres, one floats high, the other rests on a bench in the windowless yet light filled room, and on the floor, a large torn photographic image of a Japanese warship—massive, distorted, and devastating. It's enormous hull disappearing into the torn white paper border. It feels less like a message from the past, and more like a cosmic secret. A construction of history—carefully staged, then sealed inside what looked like the most ordinary of containers.

Stranger still, forensic tests, performed twice to confirm the startling results, estimated the origin of the photograph to the year 1815, 11 years before the first known photographic plate by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce was created in 1826-27. Niépce's photograph, known as *View from the Window at Le Gras*, was created using a process called heliography. The image was captured on a pewter plate coated with bitumen of Judea, placed inside a camera obscura. The exposure time was estimated to be between 8 hours to 2 days. Unlike *Window at Le Gras*, *Vermeer's Paradox* was not captured using a camera obscura, but a more sophisticated camera with an adjustable lens. "This image," says Dr. Ilona Bertram, "should not exist. It's not a photograph of a room, but a portrait of time folding in on itself. No one can account for how the 19th century photographic print captured a salesman's carrying case for a film projector that was patented in Amsterdam in 1938. These temporal anomalies have made this photograph quite mysterious, and in terms of experiencing multiple times simultaneously; it's been called painterly. In fact, as its nickname suggests, some have likened the composition to a Johannes Vermeer painting—not only in subject, but in light. The way the spheres refract the background, capturing the light naturally, transparently, and within a specific temporal moment. There is, they say, a quality of stillness that suggests not stasis, but waiting. Hanging on the far wall like a forgotten Dutch history painting is a battered 1938 Netherlands Indies postage stamp, that bears postmarks that identify the Japanese occupation in 1942, and a subsequent postmark of a spade, a symbol of pro-Indonesian independence.

The salesman's carrying case, still intact, is finally being looked at with extra care by the Philadelphia Historical Society, after nearly 70 years gathering dust in their archive. Digital scans and multispectral imaging have revealed something remarkable. The dimensions of the room do not match any physical or optical logic. The two mysterious spheres one slightly larger than the other were actually discovered in the attic of the former home of the 17th century Dutch painter from Delft, Jacobus Zwart (1624-1686) in March of 2021. This brought speculation whether or not this painter had befriended and collaborated with Delft's most famous artist obsessed with optics and lenses, Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675). In July 2021, Dr Bertram went to Delft to inspect the spheres. When she approached them, she reached out to pick up the larger glass sphere and in the refracted image, the room flipped upside down. She held the smaller sphere in front of the other and the upside-down room became crisply focused. She announced that tiny scratches found on the glass spheres were identical to those in the photograph and got permission to bring them back to Philadelphia to further study them and reunite them with the carrying case that once housed them. How they became united in the first place, no one will ever know. A day later she was in her office when she carefully placed the glass spheres back in place, resting precisely where the housing of the 1938 Philips film projector would have once stood. "No one took the photograph," Dr. Bertram wrote on Philadelphia Historical Society letterhead, dated May 6, 2022. "Think of it more as a piece of history that has become visible." This photo has since become the holy grail of temporal-displacement photography. One skeptical Dutch art historian pejoratively called it a "hallucinatory postcolonial afterimage", while others claim the photograph represents a space encoded with grief and intergenerational trauma. Others believe it is an archival phantasm, produced not by a photographer but by history itself—briefly coalescing into visibility before vanishing again. There was no explanation that was not extraordinary. Some speculated the spheres were not artifacts, but instruments—of capture, or recursion, and that the case was in fact a camera, but one not of light or silver—but one of *time*. That perhaps it did not document what had been, but what *would be*, and replayed it backwards, as a kind of unforeseen prerecorded message. "There are elements in the photograph," Bertram notes, "that imply it was projected forward in time, as if through some unknown optical device. The magician who conjured up *Vermeer's Paradox* thought time could fold up like a newspaper.

Dr. Alfred Grossman, Senior Curator and Head of Photographs and Optical Devices at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, recently visited Dr. Bertram to see the original print. He said the historical discovery of time-displaced photography dated to the early 19th century, is nothing short of miraculous. Dr. Grossman and Dr. Bertram are equally obsessed with finding the identity of the "photographer" whom they have jointly called a celebrated mythmaker. A

power struggle ensued when The Philadelphia Historical Society was pressured to send the photograph with its original carrying case, and the glass spheres to the Getty Institute for preservation concerns. “If these items went to the Getty, *Vermeer’s Paradox* is the kind of photograph that will likely never be seen again above ground”, said Dr. Bertram, who refused to give up the photograph and the carrying case with the glass spheres. She continued, “The Getty owns the largest photographic archive in the world, and they license images that are physically stored in a heavily guarded limestone mine in western Pennsylvania. This archive, called the Bettmann collection, contains over 11 million images, including historical photos, some dating back to the beginning of photography. Although the mine’s stable environment 220 feet below ground helps to preserve these delicate materials and slow their degradation, the significant downside is that the original photographic print, *Vermeer’s Paradox*, will never be seen in person again if it falls into their hands.”

As attention around *Vermeer’s Paradox* swelled, a surprising lead emerged from an overlooked corner of the Philadelphia Historical Society’s acquisition records. A folded receipt, handwritten in a nearly illegible Dutch cursive script, was found pressed between pages of an unrelated 19th-century book of botanical illustrations. The receipt was from a defunct photography shop on Leidsestraat in Amsterdam, dated March 12, 1939, and bore the signature: Bram Zwart. At first, researchers believed this was an unrelated name. But Bram Zwart, it turned out, was the last living descendant—of the enigmatic 17th-century Delft painter Jacobus Zwart, long rumored to be a forgotten rival to Vermeer. Jacobus, known only through scattered auction catalog entries and a fascinating treatise on reflective optics titled *Licht & Tijd* (“Light & Time”), had all but vanished from art historical memory. According to Dutch civil archives and immigration records, Bram Zwart was born in 1907 in Delft and trained as an optical engineer at the Delft University of Technology. He worked for the Dutch company Philips in the 1930s, specifically in their film projector division, designing miniature and at times massive projection systems. During a brief and unrecorded sabbatical in 1938, Zwart traveled to the Dutch East Indies (current day Indonesia)—under mysterious circumstances. He returned with a sealed projector case and promptly resigned from his post. Less than a year after his return, on November 10, 1940 the German’s bombed Rotterdam and after 5 days of fighting had occupied The Netherlands. Zwart’s whereabouts during the war are completely unknown, and unprovable. There are rumors that he was in the Dutch Resistance. In Zwart’s case it appears to have been true; he used his carrying case/camera to falsify personal identification cards, deliver forged documents, hiding them behind the lining in the box.

After WWII, in 1947, Zwart reemerged in Philadelphia, claiming to be a traveling projector salesman. Some believe Bram Zwart’s journey was not merely physical, but primary temporal. According to Dr. Ilona Bertram, Zwart may have discovered or constructed a miniature time-displacement mechanism—perhaps with inherited notes from Jacobus—that allowed the camera and its case to record not just light, but what Zwart described as “projecting human consciousness across centuries”. The interior space of the case was likely calibrated by aligning the glass spheres—once in the attic of Jacobus Zwart—with the lens axis of the Philips projector. This configuration may have created a recursive optical loop in which time, and light shook into physical visibility. Zwart donated the box anonymously without any explanation or instructions to the Philadelphia Historical Society in 1950, after that there is not one trace of Bram Zwart’s existence. He was 43 at the time, coincidentally the same age that Johannes Vermeer died in Delft in 1675.

Dr. Bertram just teamed up with The Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia, which specializes in historic and literary manuscripts. They have organized an incredible exhibition set to open immediately, and will be up indefinitely, focusing on the Bram Zwart’s salesman’s carrying case, with its glass spheres in place, the Philips film projector that fits the container will also be on display. The original photograph of *Vermeer’s Paradox*, will be shown for the first time in public, alongside speculative diagrams by several groups of experts of how the photograph came to exist.